

New abolition movement

One of President Bush's more engaging appointees visited New Bedford yesterday to promote national legislation calling for the abolition of chronic homelessness in 10 years.

Philip Mangano, the national homelessness czar and formerly the director of the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, has done a data-driven, scientific analysis of the homelessness problem and has concluded that it should not be accepted as a fact of life. Instead, homelessness should be abolished.

But he is no wide-eyed idealist. He has a plan.

It is a refreshing plan that he has been selling to mayors and governors across the country as he encourages them to adopt 10-year strategies to eliminate chronic homelessness.

He points out that homeless people did not begin to populate the streets and back alleys of America's towns and cities in large numbers until the 1970s and '80s. The emergence of homelessness coincided with a national movement to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill.

Although it was a good idea to get people out of inhuman institutions, there was no effective planning for the housing of the most chronically mentally ill. Many quickly lost any support systems and landed on our streets.

Mr. Mangano's strategy is to create assisted living for the chronically mentally ill, in scattered sites.

Some of this already is being done, but not enough. Although these people make up only 10 percent of the homeless population, they take up more than 50 percent of the financial resources.

And once these people have stable homes and assistance taking their medications and staying healthy, they will actually cost the society far less in terms of emergency hospital visits and police calls.

This also will free up resources to help the less chronically homeless, a more fluid population of families and single people who are typically homeless for shorter periods as they struggle to find work and affordable housing.

The best part of Mr. Mangano's idea is his insistence on results. For too long, he says, we have been investing money in the homelessness problem and making no headway. In fact, as we have spent more money, we have seen more homeless people.

Vast numbers of social service agencies have been running on the assumption that you simply manage homelessness, but don't ever solve it, he says.

Mr. Mangano is right that this is a losing strategy.

He considers the abolitionists his model. They were not satisfied with a society that was convinced that you had to accept "the peculiar institution" of slavery. They pushed the radical idea of abolition.

Mr. Mangano also points out that England under Prime Minister Tony Blair has proven that the results-oriented way to attack homelessness actually works. There, money is reinvested in communities when they have shown they have reduced the numbers of people living on the streets.

The key to Mr. Mangano's idea is setting clear goals and being sure they are met in a timely fashion.

We look forward to seeing New Bedford's inter-agency committee on homelessness establish very public benchmarks for eliminating homelessness from the city.

If Chicago can move boldly toward the elimination of chronic homelessness in a decade, this small city should be able to do it even more quickly.